Companion Guide

for Two Tools Designed for Secondary Schools

BRINGING FAMILIES AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS CLOSER TOGETHER

Tool Kit

Québec

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INTRODUCTION

All parents care deeply about their children's success and well-being. Students' success in secondary school is the culmination of a long process punctuated with a variety of different experiences, starting from birth and occurring throughout their preschool, elementary and secondary education. Their success is also influenced by all the different individuals that young people encounter on their journey through life and school: family and friends, community members, teachers and other professionals, school administrators, support staff, and so forth.

Students' success in secondary school, whether in the area of learning, socialization or qualifications, also ensues from multiple factors to which many people contribute: the school climate, the school's wholehearted commitment to student success, the relationship between the teaching staff and the students, the students' motivation to learn what is covered in the programs of study, their attitude towards school, their academic and career aspirations, community support, collaboration among the school, the family and the community, to name only a few.

Among all these factors, parents' involvement with their children throughout the educational process is undeniably a key factor in young people's success. Several research studies have shown that parental school involvement carries long-lasting effects and has a direct impact on young people's attitudes and behaviour toward school, school work, perseverance, academic results and general development.

One of the most productive means of fostering parental involvement at the secondary level is to bring the family and the school closer together by forging a solid partnership between the two. This partnership allows the school to gain a clearer picture of families' situations and to better meet their needs by working in close touch with community organizations, for example. The community links built by the secondary school significantly enhance the effectiveness and complementarity of the initiatives taken by the school. Schools could take advantage of the situation to build this concern into their educational projects and success plans.

Creating ties between the school, the family and the community is even more crucial in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, as in the case of schools targeted by the *New Approaches, New Solutions* (NANS) intervention strategy.

Even so, questions are still being raised by the main participants (schools, families, CLSCs, community groups, etc.) involved in school-family partnerships. These questions refer more specifically to the type of parental involvement that is desirable in secondary schools and to the best ways for schools to foster parental involvement and the school-family partnership, which may in some cases involve other community partners.

WHAT KIND OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IS PREFERABLE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

Parents' involvement consists in being active within the school and offering other forms of support at home. In elementary schools, parents are often highly visible within the school itself. Every day, many parents take their children to school and chat with the staff of the after-school program. They also participate actively in school activities and attend school events in great numbers. As the years go by, however, parents are seen less and less in the school, especially when their children start secondary school. This reduced visibility can be explained in part by teenagers' growing desire for independence, parents' busy work schedules or the physical distance between home and school.

This change in parental behaviour must in no way lead us to conclude that parents are less committed to their children. Nor must we minimize the extent of parental involvement in secondary schools. Parents show their involvement in many ways. They attend activities involving their children (e.g. shows, sports, exhibits). They participate in information sessions or meetings to follow their children's progress in school. They meet with staff members to discuss their children's report cards or to try to find solutions to situations their children are experiencing, or play a role on parent committees or the governing board.

Parents' collaboration at the secondary level is not limited to what they do at the school, for they can also be effective by offering other forms of support at home. There are other highly valid forms of involvement that are acceptable to teenagers and that can be encouraged by the school staff. Secondary-school students still need for their parents to be involved in their lives and to give them emotional support. They enjoy talking about what is happening at school not only with their friends and teachers but also with their parents. They don't mind asking for their parents' help during exam time. They like discussing which courses they should take or which career options they should consider, and they appreciate having parents who encourage them.[1] These aspects, though often overlooked, are absolutely essential.

Parental participation evolves, so that the forms it takes in secondary school are different from those it took at the elementary level. But it is no less essential to the success of secondary school students. That is why secondary schools must encourage parents to be involved in their children's education, both at home and at the school.

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS FOR THE SCHOOL TO FOSTER PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP?

Parents will contribute much more freely if the school staff uses a variety of means that touch their children's lives. Paying special attention to school-family communication, caring about the way in which parents are welcomed at school and about the messages sent to them, tackling topics of concern to parents, such as their teenagers' health and safety, inviting parents to participate in school life, suggesting ways in which parents can feel comfortable volunteering, enlisting the help of community resources to meet families' specific needs—all these efforts combined can help make parental involvement in secondary schools a concrete reality.

1. Rollande Deslandes and Richard Cloutier, "Adolescents' perception of parental school involvement," *School Psychology International* 23, no. 2 (2002): 220-232.

It is also important for teachers to encourage parents to be available to their children at home, to show interest in their children's lives and to support their dreams and achievements. When it is the teacher who solicits the parents' participation, parents are more apt to communicate with their children at home, they feel better able to help their children and they develop greater respect for the teaching staff's competence.

Valuing the role that parents play in their teenagers' lives, while keeping in mind parents' expectations and abilities, is of vital importance. Many parents worry that their children will fail or drop out of school, and they want greater support in their role as parents.[2] Many also admit that they are poorly equipped, if not unable, to follow what their children are learning in class. The truth is, it is not always easy to competently supervise teenagers' science or math homework or to help them write a critical essay on a novel they have read. The school staff cannot expect parents to provide a professional level of follow-up to their children's studies. Parents must be made aware that they can contribute to their teenagers' success simply by being warm, open and attentive to their school life.[3]

That assertion is all the more valid in disadvantaged areas, where some parents have lower education levels and face a series of hardships linked to poverty. These hardships vary widely depending on whether the family environment is urban, rural, homogeneous, multiethnic or predominantly immigrant. It is therefore important for schools to know their students' families well and to help them find solutions that fit their lives.

Instead of trying on their own to meet the needs of families and youth, the school staff should build community partnerships. It is in the school's interest to become familiar with the community resources (municipal services, cultural groups, CLSCs, social services, etc.) that can contribute to promoting "the development of the full potential of youth and families"[4] and their students' educational success.[5] Similarly, the school can only benefit from informing parents about these resources in response to some of their most commonly expressed needs and from putting families and community groups in contact with each other so that they can share views and information. In so doing, the school staff fosters parents' sense of belonging to an education community.

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2. Québec, Conseil de la famille. "*Les familles avec adolescents, entre le doute et l'incertitude. Le rapport 2001-2001 sur la situation et les besoins des familles et des enfants*," (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2002).
3. Sarah Landy and Kwan Tam Kwok, "Yes, Parenting Does Make a Difference to the Development of Children in Canada," *Growing Up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, HRDC, 1996), 117-126; Rollande Deslandes and Pierre Potvin, "Le milieu familial et la réussite éducative des adolescents," *Bulletin du CRIRES*, Nouvelles CEQ, January-February 1998, 1-4; Centre de transfert pour la réussite éducative du Québec (CTREQ), *Leur réussite, c'est aussi la nôtre*, Awareness campaign on parenting, Research results obtained by Pierrette Bouchard (November 2003), see www.teaq.qc.ca; Pierre Potvin, Laurier Fortin, Diane Marcotte, Égide Royer and Rollande Deslandes, *Guide de prévention du décrochage scolaire* (Québec: CTREQ, 2004), 30.
4. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Two Networks, One Objective: The Development of Youth, Agreement for the complementarity of services between the health and social services network and the education network*, Message from the Ministers (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003).
5. Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Learning Difficulties in School: Reference Framework for Intervention* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003), 18.

The solutions that are most effective for ensuring success are those that take place concurrently in the classroom, the school, the family and the community, in short, every place that influences young people's development. When parents, teachers, youth workers and employers all say as one, "Education is your passport to life, we believe that you will succeed and we are behind you," young people gain greater confidence in their ability to persevere and succeed. When all those in contact with teenagers are committed to, and fully convinced of, the decisive importance of backing them in their quest for success, teenagers hear a message that is consistently the same and, consequently, stronger.

It is definitely possible to bring families and secondary schools closer together. Communicating with parents using a variety of means, fostering dialogue between the teaching staff and parents about their teenagers, placing value on the role of parenting while taking into account families' concrete situations, identifying and informing parents of the community resources that can help their families, putting the different partners in contact with one another, including school staff, parents and the different social, cultural, institutional and economic partners—all of these actions help build close ties between secondary schools and families. These concurrent actions can be very beneficial to teenagers, especially those in disadvantaged areas, and can help increase parents' sense of empowerment and belief in their ability to act.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMPANION GUIDE

This companion guide, aptly titled *Bringing Families and Secondary Schools Closer Together*, is designed to help schools develop their own ways of working together with parents. It presents two new tools made available to school staff with a view to supporting the efforts of Québec secondary schools to build a rewarding partnership with parents.

Originally developed for socioeconomically disadvantaged areas as part of the *Supporting Montréal Schools Program* and the *New Approaches, New Solutions* intervention strategy, these tools have been adapted to suit all areas. Several questionnaires and other documents were consulted during the development of these two tools.[6]

Favouring an approach that is flexible, user-friendly, open to dialogue and adaptable to each school's distinct characteristics, the two tools described in this guide are the *Inventory of the School's Practices*, meant for school staff, and the *Questionnaire for Parents*, designed to be used in parent meetings after the school inventory has been completed. These tools are based on the most recent research studies and common concerns voiced by the education community. They also deal with the main issues involved in the school-family partnership.

These two tools will enable parents and school staff to get to know one another better. The suggested procedure will help the school staff gain a clearer understanding of parents' needs and suggestions, initiate appropriate projects, activities or services and, where necessary, work more closely with the community to ensure the success of all secondary school students.

Four areas of school-family collaboration have been given special attention: (1) school-family communication, (2) role of parents, (3) parent participation in school life, and (4) collaboration with the community. These four focus areas also constitute the major components in both tools. In the following pages, we present the four focus areas and then describe the two tools, suggest guidelines for their use and discuss the results-analysis forms related to each tool. Finally, we examine how these tools can be linked with other school intervention strategies.

Appendix 1 contains the *Inventory of the School's Practices*. It presents the questions to be asked in the inventory and the forms to be used to summarize the results and plan any action to be taken. The questions and forms are divided by focus area.

Appendix 2 contains the *Questionnaire for Parents*. Here again the questions are divided by focus area.

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6. Of special mention are the *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* (Canada: Statistics Canada, 1994); the *Enquête sur la collaboration école-famille* (Lise Saint-Laurent, 1994); the U.S. publication *School and Family Partnerships: Surveys and Summaries* by J.L. Epstein and K.C. Salinas (1993) from Johns Hopkins University; the questionnaires in the U.S. publication *Taking Stock: The Inventory of Family, Community and School Support for Student Achievement* by the National Committee for Citizens in Education (1993); and the toolkit prepared by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec for immigrant parents ("Parents-partenaires," MEQ, 1995).

Appendix 3 contains the forms for compiling and analyzing the results obtained through the *Questionnaire for Parents*. These forms, too, are divided by focus area.

All this documentation is included in a two-pocket folder. The right-hand pocket contains this companion guide and its three appendixes:

APPENDIX 1 – *Inventory of the School's Practices*

APPENDIX 2 – *Questionnaire for Parents*

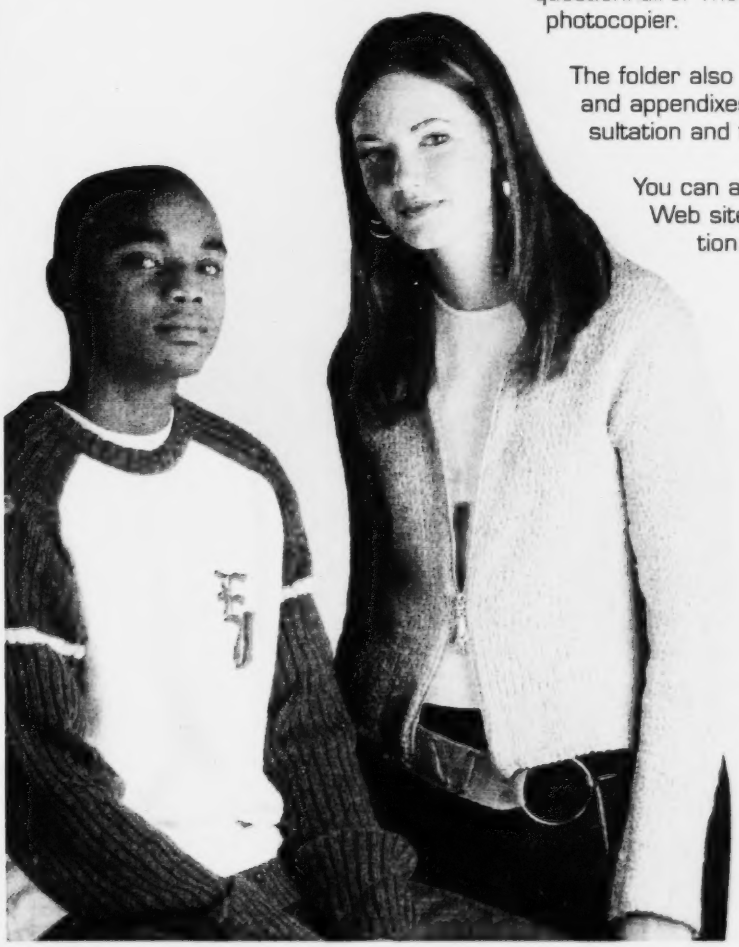
APPENDIX 3 – *Results-Analysis Forms Related to the Questionnaire for Parents*

The left-hand pocket contains the *Questionnaire for Parents*, along with guidelines for using the questionnaire. The guidelines can be easily reproduced with a standard photocopier.

The folder also contains a CD-ROM with two versions of the guide and appendixes in PDF format. One version is for on-screen consultation and the other is provided in a printer-friendly format.

You can also download the guide and its appendixes from the Web site of the *New Approaches, New Solutions* intervention strategy:

http://www.meq.gouv.qc.ca/agirautrement.



FOUR FOCUS AREAS IN THE SCHOOL-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

The publications we consulted contain several models developed for the purposes of identifying and explaining the aspects to consider in the school-family partnership.[7] From these different models we selected four primary focus areas:[8] (1) school-family communication, (2) role of parents, (3) parent participation in school life, and (4) collaboration with the community. We have adapted these primary focus areas to include specific recommended actions. These actions are:

FOCUS AREA 1 DIVERSIFYING AND FACILITATING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND THE SCHOOL

FOCUS AREA HELPING PARENTS EXERCISE THEIR ROLE

FOCUS AREA ENCOURAGING PARENTS TO PARTICIPATE IN SCHOOL LIFE

FOCUS AREA WORKING MORE CLOSELY WITH THE COMMUNITY TO MEET THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE

FOCUS AREA 1 Diversifying and facilitating communication between parents and the school

Focus area 1 is tied to the need to use varied and effective methods of communication between the school and families about all aspects affecting young people's lives. It focuses on the welcome parents receive at the school, the frequency and variety of written messages or verbal exchanges, the clarity of the messages transmitted to parents, etc.

Focus area 1 is the first **priority** because it is only by establishing a genuine dialogue between the school and parents that we can strengthen parents' role, their participation in school life and their community involvement.

7. Rollande Deslandes, "Une visée partenariale dans les relations entre l'école et les familles: complémentarité de trois cadres conceptuels," *La revue internationale de l'éducation familiale* 3, nos. 1-2, 1999, 30-47.
8. We retained part of the typology developed by Joyce Epstein, which has been extensively tested and evaluated in the United States, in some Québec schools and in over 30 countries. See in particular: Joyce L. Epstein, *School, family and community partnerships* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001) as well as the Web site of the National Network of Partnership Schools www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/nnps2000/default.htm. See also Québec, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Supporting Montreal Schools Program, 2002-2003* (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003), 17.

FOCUS AREA **Helping parents exercise their role**

Focus area 2 concerns the need to show parents how important a role they play, to allow them to share their concerns about different aspects of their teenagers' lives and development (e.g. parent-teenager communication, teenagers' general well-being, health and safety) and to help them exercise this role (e.g. supervising and helping out with homework, behaviour that is warm, open and attentive to their children's lives).

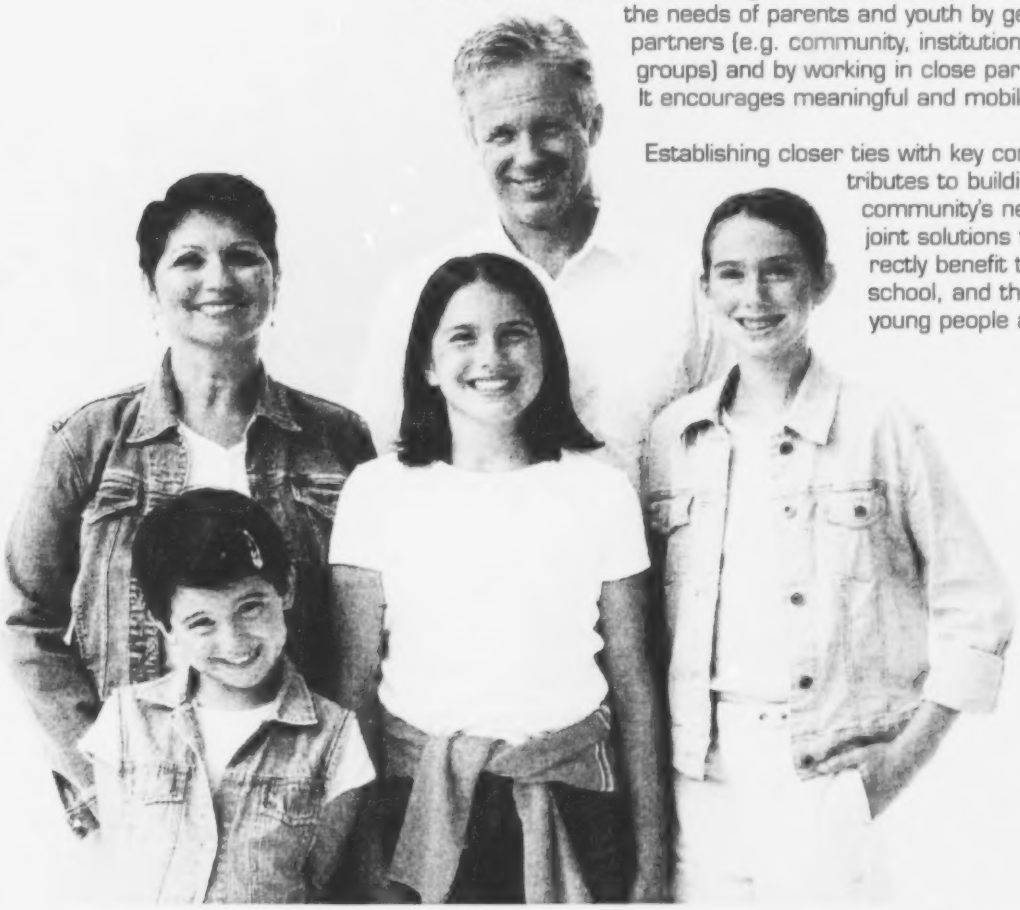
FOCUS AREA **Encouraging parents to participate in school life**

Focus area 3 refers to the practices adopted by the school to encourage parents or groups of parents to be actively involved in school life. For example, parents can attend activities or events organized for or by the students, or they can volunteer in a variety of ways for different types of activities.

FOCUS AREA **Working more closely with the community to meet the needs of families and young people**

Focus area 4 relates to building school-community links. It invites schools to meet the needs of parents and youth by getting to know other local partners (e.g. community, institutional, cultural or economic groups) and by working in close partnership with them. It encourages meaningful and mobilizing initiatives.

Establishing closer ties with key community partners contributes to building a shared vision of the community's needs and to implementing joint solutions that may directly or indirectly benefit the classroom, the school, and the home environments of young people and their families.



TWO TOOLS: INVENTORY OF THE SCHOOL'S PRACTICES AND QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS

WHY TWO TOOLS?

Although different and intended for separate audiences, the *Inventory of the School's Practices* and the *Questionnaire for Parents* are designed to be used together, one after the other.

The school team begins the process by using the inventory to analyze its parent-school partnership practices and to plan the course of action to adopt. The school team then uses the questionnaire to ask the parents to present their viewpoints and express their needs. The school follows up by comparing the parents' perceptions and proposals with those offered by the school staff, and subsequently adjusts its partnership practices, if necessary.

These two tools are built directly around the four primary focus areas mentioned previously: (1) school-family communication, (2) role of parents, (3) parent participation in school life, and (4) collaboration with the community.

Instrument : *Inventory of the School's Practices*

This tool is a discussion guide intended for all the members of the school team, including the partners whose involvement in this process is considered important. The broader the range of people consulted in the school and community, the easier it will be to choose suitable practices to adopt.

Using questions, reflection topics, illustrations and examples, the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (see appendix 1) allows the school to gain an overview of its current collaborative relationship with parents with regard to each of the four focus areas and then to plan a course of action. The many examples provided in that document are not there by chance; rather, they are modelled on strategies backed by solid research and already adopted by certain schools.

After having reflected on the inventory and planned certain interventions, the school will choose one or more of the most relevant focus areas to include in the parent questionnaire. A thorough examination of the school's current practices could reveal, for example, that communication with parents tends to be one-way only (i.e. from the school to the families). This observation could then lead the school to question parents about school-family communication. After analyzing the parents' input, the school may very well decide to vary its communication methods, to propose new ones, to simplify its written messages, and so forth.

Instrument : *Questionnaire for Parents*

The *Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 2) is meant for the parents of secondary-school students. It is designed to be used in meetings held with parents after the inventory has been completed. It is not intended for large-scale distribution to all the parents at once unless the school is very small. Rather, it should be used to gather the opinions of small groups of parents. This approach helps establish and maintain a trusting relationship between the school team and the families.

The questionnaire allows parents to present their viewpoints, comments and suggestions and to express their needs in relation to the focus area(s) selected by the school team. After analyzing the parents' input, the school will then check whether its practices match parents' concerns and wishes. Later, the school can adjust or enhance its practices.

Since the parent meetings are meant to gather as many different ideas and opinions as possible, the aim of the questionnaire is neither to reach a consensus nor to make decisions. It uses simple, concrete language to encourage the full participation of parents from a variety of environments, whether socioeconomically disadvantaged, multiethnic or other.

The questionnaire is designed to reflect the realities of all regions of Québec. Some of the questions may not apply to all parents. Schools should identify the questions that do not apply to their areas and make sure that parents know that they are not required to answer them. In addition, if a school decides to add questions, it should know how to formulate them and how to analyze the parents' answers.

Like the inventory, the questionnaire explores many needs and provides parents with many suggestions to meet those needs. Considering the expectations that this exercise may elicit in parents, it would be preferable to carry out the process one step at a time, one focus area at a time, and to omit any focus area that might give rise to expectations that the school could not meet in the near future.

The methods for using these two tools are flexible and allow each school team a great deal of leeway. Guidelines are presented further on to help make the tools easier to use and to demonstrate their full potential. As you will see from the start of the inventory all the way to the adjustment of the school's practices, these tools can lead to a variety of options.

SEQUENCE FOR USING THE TWO TOOLS

To make the process easier to understand, we have included a detailed sequence for using these tools.

Before using the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1) to survey the school staff:

- Plan how to lead the meetings with the school staff and main partners by following the guidelines presented in this companion guide.
- We recommend starting with focus area 1.

Using the questions in the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1):

- Begin the process of identifying the school's practices with the school staff.

Using the first results-analysis form included in the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1):

- Analyze the inventory results.
- Reflect on any action to be taken.

Before collecting information from the parents, using the *Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 2):

- Choose the most useful focus area(s) in the *Questionnaire for Parents*.
- Plan for the parent meeting by following the guidelines recommended in this document. (They are also provided on sheets to be found in the left-hand pocket.)

Use the *Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 2) to:

- Collect information on the focus area(s) to be covered in the parent meetings.

Use the *Results-Analysis Forms Related to the Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 3) to:

- List and classify the parents' answers and comments on the selected focus area(s).
- Highlight the key points related to the focus area(s).

Use the phase 2 results-analysis form in the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1) to:

- Compare the results from the inventory and the questionnaire.
- Plan how to adjust the school's strategies, activities and services.

Adjust and enhance the school's practices, if necessary.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR USING THE TWO TOOLS

To make the best use of the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1) and the Questionnaire for Parents (appendix 2), you should plan how you would like to proceed and how extensive the process will be.

For this operation to succeed, it would be best to:

- **Appoint a specific person or form a team** to take charge of the process, that is, to suggest different ways of using the tools in the school and community, to establish a flexible work schedule, to analyze the information gathered and to convey the results.
- **Ensure the support and active involvement of the different stakeholders in the school.**
- **Assign the different tasks to staff members and possibly free them from their regular duties** to make it easier for them to take an active part throughout the process.
- **Ask members of the governing board to support and participate in the process** after having outlined the target objectives and explained that they will be kept informed throughout the process.
- **Identify other community partners** who should ideally collaborate in this process. These partners could in some cases help lead the meetings during which parents fill out and discuss the questionnaire. Involving community members can also help clarify the parents' interests and expectations and consolidate the information originating from the school. It is therefore important to give them all the relevant information to ensure their full participation.
- **Pay special attention to the messages** sent to staff members, parents and community partners. The way in which they are informed of the process and resulting follow-up is essential for ensuring their full co-operation.
- **Give priority to focus area 1, *Diversifying and facilitating communication between parents and the school.*** As we mentioned before, this focus area is a **priority** for establishing and maintaining healthy and open communication between secondary schools and parents.

It is also important to acknowledge the contribution of those who participate in the process, to keep them informed of upcoming steps and to enlist their help in determining the direction that future actions should take.

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE INVENTORY OF THE SCHOOL'S PRACTICES

Collecting information related to each focus area of the inventory will help in two ways: (1) it will bring out different aspects liable to enhance the analysis of the situation with regard to the school-family partnership; and (2) it will develop a common view of the school's overall assessment, strengths and weaknesses. The ensuing discussions can lead to considering actions or measures to be implemented in the short, medium or long term. These actions or measures will then need to be validated and reviewed in light of the parents' needs and interests as expressed in the questionnaire.

So that each step in the school inventory is successful, it would be important to:

- **Ensure that those involved in the inventory process are representative** of the entire school staff: teachers and other professionals, support staff, administrators, etc.
- **Include in the reflection process those** partners from inside or outside the school **whose actions and services affect young people and their families** and the selected focus area(s).
- **Cover all the focus areas** to gain a fuller picture of the staff's perceptions, even if it is preferable to give priority to focus area 1.
- **Vary** and adapt **the ways of using** the inventory by considering different data-collection scenarios with the school staff and other partners, such as the following:

Scenario 1 – Individual responses

The questions in the *Inventory of the School's Practices* can be answered on an individual basis even though this tool is primarily designed for group reflection.

Scenario 2 – Small-group responses

Discussions can be led with small groups who share the same concerns (e.g. staff members concerned about young people making the transition from elementary school; those involved with students at risk or with students in a given cycle). The results can then be shared with the entire group.

Scenario 3 – Large-group responses

In smaller schools, the reflection process can be carried out in a large group by mobilizing the entire school team.

It is advisable to invite other community partners to join in the discussion to enhance the school's profile.

Schools may of course develop other scenarios that correspond to their own reality.

- **Choose actions to implement** in the short, medium or long term that **take into account the school staff's profile and perceptions.**

- **Establish an operating procedure** (e.g. who is in charge, tasks, work schedule, conditions for success). For **each chosen course of action**, it would be best to assign the different tasks to staff members and possibly free them from their regular duties.

- **Take special care in formulating the messages** when the time comes to inform all the participants about the practices considered appropriate, those that need improvement and those that will be implemented in the short term.

- **Adopt the means to follow up the new actions and to evaluate their impact** once some time has elapsed after their implementation, so that any adjustments can be made.

GUIDELINES FOR USING THE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS

BEFORE DISTRIBUTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Before handing out the *Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 2), it is important to plan how you will proceed and to determine how extensive the process will be. For this operation to succeed, it would be advisable to:

- **Take the process one step at a time,** one focus area at a time, and to omit any focus area which might give rise to expectations that the school would be unable to meet in the near future.

- **Make sure that the parents involved in this process are representative** of all the school's parents. Try to involve parents with children in different cycles, parents whose children have special needs, parents whose children are facing difficult situations, parents of allophone students, parents who are usually more difficult to reach, parents on the governing board or on the different school committees, parents who volunteer their services, etc.

- **Vary the ways used to contact and inform the parents** who are likely to take part in this process: letters, telephone calls, posters, etc. In the letter of invitation to parents, mention the objectives of the process as well as the services available to those who may need them during the meetings in which they fill out and discuss the questionnaire (e.g. after-school program or activities to keep younger children busy during scheduled meetings).

- **Vary and adapt the ways used to gather information from the parents** who are able to answer the questionnaire individually, in small groups on the school premises or away from school, with the help of CLSC or community workers, or during school events (e.g. back-to-school activities, report card time, celebrations).

- **Adapt to parents' needs by planning ways to help those** who are unable to read or unused to reading, as well as allophone parents who do not speak or read English, by proposing other ways of answering the questionnaire. During the meetings, it is advisable to have resource persons, and even interpreters, to help these parents.

- **Provide parents with a warm welcome** by posting people at the school entrance and in the designated meeting rooms, putting up posters with directions to the meeting room, identifying resource persons (e.g. name tags), choosing a room with a warm atmosphere, offering a light snack, providing sufficient quantities of written material, etc.

- **Vary the focus areas according to the parents' needs.** Parents' needs can differ widely from one group to another.

- **Compile as soon as possible the answers** and ideas obtained in relation to each selected focus area, using the analysis forms provided. Ideally, answers should be compiled by those who lead the parent meetings; however, if that is not feasible, this task can be done by the team in charge of the entire consultation process.

- **Allow as much time as needed for the process.** The data collection and reflection operations can occur over several weeks or even months. However, the different steps should not be too far apart to keep the momentum going and to be able to reach the action stage with those who participated in the process. It would be a good idea to assign the tasks to different staff members and possibly free them from their regular duties so that they can take an active part throughout the process.

It is always important to acknowledge the contribution of the parents who attended the meetings and who answered the questionnaire, and to keep them informed of the steps taken by the school after the meetings.

PREPARING FOR THE PARENT MEETINGS

Parent meetings are an important part of the process. The guidelines below will help you prepare to meet the parents invited to discuss and complete the *Questionnaire for Parents* (appendix 2). Although originally designed for school staff, these guidelines can also be given to the community partners involved in the parent consultation process.

Before holding the parent meetings, it would be good to:

- **Read over carefully the part of the questionnaire** to be discussed, so that you can become completely familiar with the material.

- **Identify the questions that do not apply to your school** and get ready to explain to parents why they need not answer them (e.g. the questions directed to immigrant families do not necessarily apply to all schools).

- **Plan to have a maximum of 15 parents attend each meeting.** People feel much more comfortable discussing and exchanging ideas in small groups.

- Choose a **meeting place that best suits parents' needs** in certain circumstances. Meetings can be held on premises away from the school (e.g. community centres, CLSCs, municipal recreation centres).

- Choose the **mode of operation that best suits the group attending the meeting** by determining which of the following scenarios would be the most appropriate.

Scenario 1 – Individual responses

Parents can individually answer the section of the questionnaire relating to the selected focus area. It is important to create a warm and friendly atmosphere in which parents can help one another if necessary and to avoid making them feel that this is a stressful exam situation!

Scenario 2 – Small-group responses

Ask parents to form small teams of two to three in order to answer the section of the questionnaire relating to the selected focus area. Here, team members can either write their individual answers or pool their ideas and fill out a single questionnaire for each team. When possible, members of the school staff, the parent-participation committee, community groups or other resource persons (e.g. interpreters) can provide the necessary support by writing down the answers for the team.

Possible group discussion for scenarios 1 and 2

Once the questionnaire has been completed, whether individually or in small groups, you can hold a group discussion, if you see fit. The parents then come together to express the views they have recorded in their questionnaires.

Scenario 3 – Large-group response (maximum of 15 or so parents)

This meeting takes place as if it were a group interview. The parents have their questionnaires in hand and the group leader asks the questions and initiates the discussion of the different aspects of the selected focus area. One person is in charge of writing down the parents' comments. This way of proceeding is especially effective when the parents have a lower education level or have difficulty reading, writing or speaking English.

LEADING THE PARENT MEETINGS

The guidelines below will help you lead the meetings with the parents. Originally designed for school staff, these guidelines can also be given to the partner organizations involved in the parent-consultation process.

- The **questionnaire can become a pretext for chatting** with the parents and exploring certain questions more deeply. For large-group discussions, it would be best to:

  - encourage as many people as possible to participate, but without going around the table systematically to avoid embarrassing parents who are less outgoing than others
  - encourage parents to make general comments on each major part of the questionnaire (e.g. reasons that they do not participate in activities) instead of discussing each question or statement
  - use the questions or statements in a given section (e.g. the most helpful means of communication for families) as a springboard for leading parents to determine the most important or most interesting aspects, or the suggestions that best fit their situations

- **Having resource persons available at all times** to lead the group discussions and the meetings can be very useful.

- **When the parents are poor readers**, inviting resource persons to help them read the questions and write their answers is key to the success of the process.

- **When the parents are not proficient in English**, inviting interpreters to translate the information, instructions and questions into the parents' native languages and to write their answers down in English or to help them participate in the group or team discussions also greatly contributes to the success of the operation.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WELCOMING THE PARENTS AND PRESENTING THE MEETING OBJECTIVE

Meeting with the parents is an important step in the process. Below are some suggestions for welcoming the parents and for presenting the meeting objective.
The examples provided in this section are designed to help you welcome the parents, remind them of the value of their participation, state the objective of the meeting, explain how the meeting will proceed, and hand out the questionnaire.

These suggestions must be adapted to the characteristics of the parents, the school and the community, as well as the selected focus area(s).

Welcoming the parents and introducing those in attendance

"Good evening and welcome to all of you who accepted our invitation. Let me introduce myself. I'm [*your name*], the [*your function in the school or community*]. It will be my pleasure to lead this meeting along with [*if applicable, name those present, the person taking the minutes of the meeting, those who can provide help with the questionnaires, the interpreters and other resource persons*]."

Emphasizing the value of parent participation

"This meeting is very important to us. At [*name of the school*], we know you play a very important role with your children, and you hope they will succeed in life and in school. We hope so as well. By getting the school and families to work more closely together, we can improve the chances that our young people will enjoy school, feel that we support their efforts, and ultimately succeed."

Stating or recalling the aim of the meeting

"We are currently holding similar meetings with other parents to find out what they think about [*state the focus area and explain if necessary*]. Members of the school staff are also involved in the same kind of reflection exercise so that we can gain a clearer picture of the state of our school's practices, discover our strengths and find out what we need to improve.

All these meetings will help us discover what our school is already doing, what we can improve, and how we can work more closely with you so that your children can succeed in school. Later on, we'll let you know the results of this survey.

Tonight, we would like to fill out this questionnaire with you, but we'd also like to discuss it with you to gain a fuller picture of our situation. Your ideas and comments are welcome. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions..."

Explaining how the meeting will proceed and handing out the questionnaire

"This meeting will last about _____. This is how we thought we might proceed _____." [*Explain which scenario has been chosen.*]

GUIDELINES FOR PRESENTING AND EXPLAINING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The way in which you present the questionnaire to the parents is very important. The guidelines below explain how you should present the selected focus area, review the part of the questionnaire they will answer, give parents a general idea of the types of instructions and rating scales found in the questionnaire, thank them for their co-operation and explain the next steps in the process.

These guidelines should be adapted to the characteristics of the parents, the school and the community, as well as the focus area(s) selected.

Presenting the focus areas

Each focus area in the questionnaire has an introductory text to be presented to the parents.

Reviewing the part of the questionnaire to be answered by the parents

It would be important to show parents that each of the focus areas in the questionnaire has different sections and to read them with the parents (e.g. the parent-school communication focus area has two sections: "A. What do you think about the communication between parents and the school?" and "B. What do you think could improve communication between parents and the school?"). Show them that each section ends with a space reserved for their comments or suggestions.

Explaining how parents with more than one teenager in the school should answer the questionnaire

Some schools may call only one parent meeting. If some of the parents have more than one teenager in that school, the school should clearly explain to the parents whether they need to answer the questionnaire for all or only one of their children.

Reviewing the types of instructions and rating scales found in the questionnaire, according to the selected focus area(s)

To make sure that everyone clearly understands the different instructions they must follow and the rating scales they must use to answer the questions, it is advisable to go over some of the questions with the parents. Examples are given on the next page in the section "Overview of the instructions and rating scales found in the questionnaire." The examples will have necessarily been reviewed and adapted to the focus area(s) selected by the school.

Thanking the parents at the end of the meeting and informing them of the upcoming steps in the process

At the end of the meeting, it will be important to thank the parents for their cooperation and to explain how the school plans to follow up this meeting.

OVERVIEW OF THE INSTRUCTIONS AND RATING SCALES FOUND IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Choosing the appropriate numbers

Some sections of the questionnaire contain either a series of statements to which parents must indicate their level of agreement (e.g. focus area 1, statement 11, "Written documents from the school are easy to understand.") or a series of statements to which parents must indicate how important the idea expressed is to them (e.g. focus area 3, statement 49, "It would be easier for me to volunteer if the school were to show appreciation for my work as a volunteer."). Here, parents must put a check mark, an x or any other sign in the appropriate box to the right of each statement.

Two types of four-point scales are used:

- One indicates the level of agreement with the statement, ranging from "I totally disagree" (represented by 1, the lowest number) to "I totally agree" (represented by 4, the highest number).
- The other indicates the level of importance accorded to the statement, ranging from "Not at all important (represented by 1, the lowest number) to "Very important" (represented by 4, the highest number).

Checking off reasons, topics or activities

Some sections of the questionnaire contain a series of statements from which the parents must choose those that apply. Here, the parents must put a check mark, an x or any other sign in the box to the right of any statement that applies to them (e.g. focus area 3, statement 18 "I do not know anyone at the school."). Some sections contain a series of topics or activities from which the parents must choose those that are of interest to them or their teenagers (e.g. focus area 2, statement 38 "The choice of courses in secondary school").

Indicating the three most important topics

After parents have checked off a series of reasons, topics or activities (see previous instruction), they must indicate in the three boxes provided, the numbers corresponding to the three items they consider to be the most important. Since many parents tend to check off several reasons, topics or activities, this gives them the chance to choose those that they truly consider to be the most important.

Answering Yes/No questions

Some of the sections of the questionnaire contain a list of Yes/No questions. After reading a statement, often followed by some examples (e.g. focus area 2, statement 23, "The school informs me of how important parent-teenager relationships are."), the parents must place a check mark, an x or any other sign in either the Yes box or the No box.

Confirming or refuting a statement by answering Yes or No

Some of the sections of the questionnaire contain a list of statements that parents must either confirm or refute. After reading a statement (e.g. focus area 4, statement 3 "I participate in the activities of certain organizations."), parents must place a check mark, an x or any other sign in either the Yes box or the No box.

RESULTS COMPILATION AND ANALYSIS

These two tools are designed primarily to help people reflect on the current state of the school-family partnership and to choose actions liable to improve the situation, rather than to obtain quantifiable results. To make it easier to analyze the results obtained, we have provided different analysis forms with each tool.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULTS-ANALYSIS FORMS RELATED TO THE *INVENTORY OF THE SCHOOL'S PRACTICES*

Two forms for summarizing the results and planning future actions are provided with the *Inventory of the School's Practices* (appendix 1). Using the questions in the inventory, the person(s) in charge of the consultation process will undertake the inventory with the school staff and major partners. Using the forms provided at the end of each focus area, they immediately begin to summarize the results and to plan future strategies or actions.

Compiling the results and planning the actions take place in **two phases.**

Phase 1

During phase 1, the team uses the **first results-analysis form** to analyze the results of the inventory and to indicate any immediate action to be taken or any measures to be implemented or considered. This procedure provides the first picture of the school-family partnership. This picture is not complete, however, because it is based only on the school team's perceptions.

When this phase is completed, it is time to choose the focus area(s) to include in the parent questionnaire in order to enhance the school's practices.

Phase 2

Phase 2 begins after the parents have filled out and discussed the *Questionnaire for Parents*. Using the **second results-analysis form**, the person(s) in charge of the consultation process will compare the results obtained in the Inventory of the School's Practices with those obtained in the *Questionnaire for Parents*. This comparison brings out the points on which the parents and the school team agree and disagree in order to plan how to adjust the school's strategies, activities and services. The results obtained allow the school to adjust or possibly enhance its practices.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULTS-ANALYSIS FORMS RELATED TO THE *QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS*

Whereas the analysis forms related to the *Inventory of the School's Practices* are included in the same appendix, those related to the *Questionnaire for Parents* are provided separately in appendix 3. Upon completion of the parent survey, those in charge of the process use the forms to compile and analyze the parents' answers in the selected focus area(s).

These forms allow the school to list, classify and analyze the parents' answers and main comments.

They also allow the school to compile summaries related to the key points in each focus area. Statements covering the key points have been pre-selected and are included on the form (see below). Creating these summaries makes it easier to compare the inventory results with the questionnaire results during the second phase of the inventory analysis.

A data processing program is not needed to analyze the information collected; however, it is advisable to adopt a systematic method for compiling the results. Below is a sample analysis method.

In appendix 3, focus area 1, section A ("What do you think about the communication between parents and the school?") contains the statement "Indicate parents' general perception of the welcome they receive at the school (statements #3, #4 and #14)." To answer this question, start by creating a table. In column 1, write the statement numbers. In the other four columns, write the number of options available to the parents.

Statement	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
3				
4				
14				

For statements 3, 4 and 14, the parents had four possible options. (See appendix 2, focus area 1, section A "What do you think about the communication between parents and the school?"):

1 = I totally disagree
2 = I somewhat disagree
3 = I somewhat agree
4 = I totally agree

Let's say that six parents expressed their opinions on each of the three statements. Indicate each parent's choices with an x, then total the number of x's for all three statements.

Statement	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
3	x, x	x, x, x	x	
4	x	x, x, x	x, x	
14	x	x, x	x, x, x	
TOTAL	**4**	**8**	**6**	**0**

The option with the most answers shows the parents' general perception. In this example, option 2 represents the majority opinion. Consequently, the parents seem to agree more or less with this series of three statements.

Of course, this is only one among many ways of compiling the results. Should there be a lot of data, it would not be out of the question to use or create an electronic spreadsheet.

PERFORMING A MORE IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF ALL THE DATA COLLECTED

Those in charge of the consultation process may decide to perform a more in-depth analysis. For example, they may wish to classify the information by different problem areas or create a table showing all the information gathered from the different groups. This more in-depth analysis can take many forms, depending on the process adopted, the number of groups encountered, the need to take into account these groups' special characteristics, and the time it took to undertake the process with the parents, school staff and partners outside the school.

Those in charge can analyze all the information compiled and all the analyses carried out for all the groups of parents for each of the focus areas. It would also be possible to bring out specific aspects underlying each group's special characteristics (e.g. parents of students starting secondary school, allophone parents, parents of students in a given cycle).

As the school's situation evolves, those in charge of the process can update the information and make any necessary adjustments to the analysis or to the overall assessment.

POTENTIAL LINKS WITH OTHER SCHOOL INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

LINK WITH THE *NEW APPROACHES, NEW SOLUTIONS* INTERVENTION STRATEGY FOR DISADVANTAGED AREAS

This inventory and questionnaire can be used to draw up a portrait and analysis of the situation with regard to the students, schools, families and community in disadvantaged areas. This process is currently being undertaken by all secondary schools targeted by the *New Approaches, New Solutions* intervention strategy. In this case, the groups of respondents concerned would benefit from extending their reflection, discussion and analysis to cover each of the school-family focus areas in light of the analysis of the situation that has already been done and the decisions that have already been made (priorities, objectives, interventions, etc.)

For example, if a school has already implemented various measures to help ease the transition from elementary to secondary school or to counter absenteeism, it should check whether these measures are in fact an appropriate response, given the results obtained in the *Inventory of the School's Practices* and the *Questionnaire for Parents*.

LINK WITH *THE AGREEMENT FOR THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF SERVICES BETWEEN THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES NETWORK AND THE EDUCATION NETWORK*

An agreement for the complementarity of services between the health and social services network and the education network was approved in 2003, along with a strategy for implementing the agreement.[9] Its objective is "to achieve a common, global vision of the needs of youth and their families as well as to define the specific and common responsibilities of partners, from a perspective of continuous and coordinated interventions."[10]

This agreement recognizes that "parents are the primary persons responsible for meeting the needs of their child" (principle 1.2). This principle translates into the need:

- to count on the parents' potential
- to support parents in their role and to contribute to supporting and reinforcing their skills
- to plan and carry out all interventions in close collaboration with the parents concerned
- to consult parents through official consultation mechanisms on the relevance of the services offered based on the needs of youth and parents

The full range of services, from the most general—those that address all youth in an area—to the most specialized, are thus covered in this agreement. Local, regional and provincial mechanisms have been implemented to ensure the complementarity of the services offered.

This agreement also covers the four focus areas found in both the inventory and the questionnaire, particularly focus area 4, "Working more closely with the community to meet the needs of families and young people."

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9. Québec, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, Ministère de l'Éducation, *Agreement for the complementarity of services between the health and social services network and the education network*, Message from the Ministers (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003).
10. Ibid., 2.

LINK WITH THE JOINT PROMOTION AND PREVENTION STRATEGY SUGGESTED IN THE GUIDE *HEALTHY SCHOOLS: WELL-BEING AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS FOR ALL YOUNG PEOPLE*

The inventory and the questionnaire can also be used by schools and their partners as part of the process for developing a joint promotion and prevention action plan defined in relation to the school's educational project and success plan. The strategy proposed in the *Healthy Schools*[11] guide invites parents and community partners to combine their promotion and prevention efforts with those initiated by the school. The inventory and the questionnaire can be especially useful for determining the current state of the collaborative ties between the school and its families and for choosing promotion and prevention priorities and the most appropriate measures to implement.

The *Healthy Schools* guide suggests several promising promotion and prevention measures that encompass the four focus areas of the school-family partnership proposed in this inventory and questionnaire.

11. Québec, Institut national de santé publique, Ministère de l'Éducation, Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux, Association des CLSC et des CHSLD du Québec, *Healthy Schools: Well-Being and Educational Success for all Young People, Guide for Schools and Their Partners* (in consultation), (Québec: Gouvernement du Québec, 2003).